

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 244 315

CS 504 608

AUTHOR Combs, James
TITLE Movies as Political Communication: A Theory of Popular Representation.
PUB DATE May 84
NOTE 24p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Communication Association (34th, San Francisco, CA, May 24-28, 1984).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Auteurism; *Film Criticism; Film Production; *Films; *Film Study; Higher Education; Mass Media; *Political Socialization; *Popular Culture; *Social Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS *Political Communication

ABSTRACT

To understand film as a form of political communication, movies must be regarded as an art form made both with commercial and aesthetic considerations and with cultural, industrial, and artistic traditions in mind. Filmmaking must also be viewed as a process or as a temporal activity of a culture. Through political mediation, or the process of connecting the past, present, and future temporally to reach a reality that reconciles present contradictions, popular art informs the general public about "what's happening" politically. Movies are a part of the popular aesthetic experience of our epoch and may be studied as part of the visual activity of our popular culture. In studying films as artifacts of mediation, there is a focus on intention, or the motives of the creators; however, auteur criticism is difficult because of the highly collaborative nature of filmmaking. Content is inferred from verbal and visual structure as linked to a psychological or sociological theory. A film's impact or popularity generates inquiry as to why a particular theme or genre is successful. The criteria of adequacy used to select films for study include cultural-political themes, mythic relevance, cultural identification, dramatic power, and memorability. (CRH)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *

X This document has been reproduced as
received from the person or organization
originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve
reproduction quality.

- Points of view or opinions stated in this docu-
ment do not necessarily represent official NIE
position or policy.

ED244315

MOVIES AS POLITICAL COMMUNICATION:
A THEORY OF POPULAR REPRESENTATION

by

James Combs

Valparaiso University

Valparaiso, IN 46383

219-464-5245

prepared for delivery at the
International Communication Association meeting
San Francisco, CA, May 25-28, 1984

CS 504 608

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

James Combs

ABSTRACT

The attempt here is to learn how to best approach movies as political communication. In particular, we ask how to study the movie process as part of political change. We posit a theory of political change, and argue that movies are part of the temporal process of political mediation. Movies are a form of play through which people learn, helping to give shape to the attitude of a time. Movie dramas involve artistic recognition, giving dramatic identity to the problems of a culture and age. Popular mediation of change includes finding movie dramas that depict aspects of contemporary life that are on our minds. At least some movies are political representations, real-fictions which guide us in locating the political present in the cultural story. To that end, we posit criteria of adequacy to aid us in the identification and study of politically representative movies.

MOVIES AS POLITICAL COMMUNICATION:
A THEORY OF POPULAR REPRESENTATION

by
James Combs

The study of cultural change encompasses a broad range of theories and methods. None of them need be excluded from inquiry if we take seriously the scholarly injunction to use all the materials at our disposal to make sense out of what's happening. Movies, as well as other cultural artifacts, occur in a pluralistic universe, and there are many different and legitimate ways of studying them. When we ask the question, what about the movies is political?, we only delimit that pluralism by saying those theories and methods now can be used for purposes of political interpretation. Freudian or Marxist approaches to the movies are useful to the extent they add insight to the political processes at work in a culture and time, and not useful to the extent they inhibit our larger understanding of politics through movies. The eclectic spirit of inquiry is dangerous but necessary.

Such a charge makes matters all the more difficult when it comes to questions of valid evidence and interpretation. This has always bedeviled inquiry, but the movies seem especially difficult. The movies are a collaborative art, made with both commercial and aesthetic considerations, with cultural, industrial, and artistic traditions in mind, and released to changing and fickle audiences in varying climates of opinion. Movies are made in a culture, but they are also made in time. For this reason we must speak of the movie process, for movies are made in the context of the processes of history. This means movies must be interpreted in terms of the temporal activity of a culture-in-time, including its politics. If we interpret American culture in terms of the elusive quest for the completion of the American Dream, we have to also interpret the expression of that quest at a particular time. In the cultural and political processes of a particular time,

how is the Dream expressed?¹

In the twentieth century, one of the ways the Dream has been expressed is in representative movies. Movies are a popular art form made in the context of the processes of history, and thus can be interpreted as part of those processes. But how? We are here interested in understanding movies as part of the political processes of the American twentieth century. This means we approach movies as artifacts of the political culture-in-time, as valid evidences of political communication. But how can movies be political communication, since most of them are not, either overtly or covertly, about "politics"?

On this score we should not be too judgmental. Students of politics should always remind themselves of the injunction by one of this century's early students of politics, and political communication in particular, Arthur F. Bentley. Writing of "the raw material of government," Bentley asked: "Ought we not to draw a distinction in advance between it (politics) and other varieties of social activity, so that we can have our field of study defined and delimited at the outset?" No, he answers, we should not; rather we "shall plunge into any phenomena or set of phenomena belonging to the roughly recognized field of government."² At the end of his career, Bentley concluded that the essential "raw materials" of the study of politics were "linguistic," or more precisely "actions, not of individual men, but as wave motions of the linguistic behaviors of men, advancing and receding across the centuries."³ Bentley was afraid the study of politics would preclude phenomena which offer clues to the "process of government," including the "wave motions" of communications over time.

It is in this spirit that we want to study politics through movies. Movies are a major form of mass communication that has pervaded this century, and thus is part of the political processes that characterize the American experience during that period. Since the movies were made by and for people who were part

of that experience, they could not help but become a form of political communication. For all communications can be studied in its different formal aspects—ethical, aesthetic, logical, rhetorical, and political.⁴ As a form of communication that is created and presented in an enduring political culture, the movies contain messages about all those aspects of American society and psychology that go into the American conduct of politics—power, social structure, authority, nationalism, historical mythology, and of course the pursuit of the American Dream which is at the root of national myth.

The field of political communication, then, should expand into areas of popular communication. One can read major works or collections in political communication without much reference to, or linkage with, "popular culture"—popular music, books and magazines, television, radio, rumor and folklore, and so forth.⁵ The movies in particular offer a rich source of study. They are perhaps the most sophisticated and artistically complex popular art form ever invented. Movies were a major form of popular communication long before most other forms were even extant (popular books are the most notable exception), and they therefore have a long and complex history. In terms of political interpretation, they begin in the historical context of the upheavals of the first decade of this century, and continue down to the political conflicts and debates of the present. But the question remains, if it is the case that movies can be a source of knowledge about politics, then how do we discover that knowledge? What concepts and methods will help us grope in this admittedly murky and elusive area of inquiry? Here we want to offer some building blocks that we believe may help.

PROCESS

If it is the case that American political and social values were "given"

by the turn of this century, then movies can be useful in the study of politics by understanding how they communicate those values at a particular time, and how those depictions change over time. To do so requires a conceptualization of process, and how movies relate to politics in the context of historical process.

The idea of process is an ancient philosophical problem. Time, change, decay, novelty, creation, revolution, and similar processes have always bedeviled thinkers. But one recent formulation, that of philosopher George Herbert Mead, may be of help to us here. Mead makes the argument that reality exists in a present, and that the past and the future are hypotheticals, posited from the vantage point of a present. True, the past did occur, and the future will occur, but their reality is in the use we put them to in our present. For the present always is a tension of the continuous and discontinuous, the inherited and the novel, the past and the future. Without elaborating, Mead seems to think that a present—such as a political present—is a temporal context in which people mediate change, and do things because they seem to be the things to do at the time. All ages are ages of contradiction, and all times times of crisis because of the speciousness of the present.⁶

Mead helps us see how the cultural past and future "participate" in a present, and what is at issue in a present. In recent American history, for example, conflicts over values, and the material or moral manifestations of those values (such as the distribution of wealth), have led to important political tensions. Each "present" becomes a period, so named because of the political nature of that time. That present mediates one way or the other the political continuities which have emerged, and then fade and blend into another present. The former present becomes a past, something looked back to as useful in the present. The Sixties and the Vietnam conflict of that past are now looked back to for instruction in the present; what does it tell us about

Central America? In our specious political present, as Mead says, "memory and anticipation build on both ends," and the past is used for purposes of shaping the future. The political definition of the past situation ("what was") helps to determine what we should do now in order to define the future. Each period—a decade, say, "names" itself in terms of the novel and discontinuous elements that emerge during it. Every period in an ongoing culture is characterized by continuous and traditional elements that flow through it; but its uniqueness, its departure from the past, becomes the aspect of it that gives the time its name. There was a lot of unreason in "The Age of Reason" and lack of progress in "The Progressive Era." Nevertheless naming "what's happening" aids the definition, and indeed the impetus, of change.

This process we may term political mediation. We have argued that political cultures engage in an enduring search for the completion of the mythic promise of the culture; in the case of the United States, that is the completion of the American Dream. A culture undergoes, as it weaves its way through history, a continuing definition of its cultural self: who are we, and what should we do in order to realize ourselves as a people, both individually and collectively? What is, to use Ernest Becker's term, the "cultural heroism" needed to bring about the completion of the story?⁷ Since times and fortunes change, every period must struggle with these questions. The American Self is thus always caught in the throes of change, and thus must cope with the definition of historical Self and by dialectical opposite, The Other—the non-self, the bad self, the enemy self who is different, inadequate, or evil. Political mediation is the process by which a political culture re-defines its Self during a particular period. By "mediation" we mean the communications process by which the past is connected in the present with the future. The political process is a temporal search for a mediated political reality to reconcile the contradictions

of a present. When we speak of the attitude of a political time, we mean the political definition of the character of that time within the frame of reference of a past and future which is the presumed heritage and destiny of the political culture. We mythologize the present as much as the past and present, and connect them to the myths of political culture as they emerge in the manifold of events in the present.

The process involves not only politicians, but also artists and the general populace. It is our contention that popular art participates in political mediation, and that general publics, who attend to popular art, learn about what's happening through it. But how does this process work?

PLAY

Political mediation is a complex process, and probably impossible to specify in full. But certainly it involves play. Play is a vital element in all cultures, serving a wide variety of functions. This includes learning and re-learning cultural identities. Playing in childhood, for instance, helps us learn how to "play society," to take on the roles required as adults. Playing sports teaches us social values and structures. But what does play have to do with the serious and work-world of politics? Most directly, politics is play for most people, something experienced through the mass media and talked about in interludes in the day. It is an arena of social action that is experienced only vicariously, and arouses playful emotions and thoughts—speculating over an election, urging the President to do something, griping about taxes and the high cost of government, watching war footage on the evening news. "Playing is pretending," wrote William Stephenson, "a stepping outside of the world of duty and responsibility. Play is an interlude in the day. It is not ordinary or real. It is voluntary and not a task or moral duty. It is in some sense disinterested, providing a

temporary satisfaction."⁸ As Geertz discovered with the Balinese cockfight, the play-experience is important in an aesthetic sense, becoming a way of transforming experience into "the level of sheer appearances, where their meaning can be more powerfully articulated and more accurately perceived..."; social themes are structured and presented "in such a way as to throw into relief a particular view of their essential nature."⁹

These views of play suggest that play is a source of learning by creating an aesthetic experience. If it is the case that we learn from play, then social and political learning are part of this process too. People learn about who they are and what their culture is supposed to be about through play. The social self is presented in cultural stories people play with, and thereby learn from. Various kinds of communicative "frames"—ritual, play, humor, and so on—may serve the function of telling a cultural story. Frames, writes one observer, "all are patterned on real life but are similar to the real only in a figurative sense... (A) comment is made on ordinary experience through the juxtaposition of the unreal on the real."¹⁰ Most frames, we may suggest, are stories, narratives that tell cultural tales with didactic tones. If popular communication succeeds in transmitting political messages, it is because they are in the form of identifiable stories with which people can play. In other words, the chief cultural form of play are "plays," narrative stories performed within a dramatic frame for popular audiences.

DRAMA

Popular drama is playful art, a process through which creators and audiences share culturally meaningful plays that capture the conflicts and tensions of the times. The American identity is presented in conflict with itself, its society, and the world beyond. A society tells stories about itself to understand itself.

Individuals are attracted to stories in order to understand their social self in relations to Others—significant others in, say, love and family; generalized others in terms of Society, Institutions, and Enemies; and of course the primal conflict of Self and Other, the battle of identity within the individual.

Cultural narratives are dramas of identity, providing a theatrical identification and personification of the collective problems of the time.

Robert Frost once remarked that "people can never figure things out for themselves: they have to see them acted out by actors."¹¹ Perhaps a better way of putting this fundamental insight is that drama lets people see what it is that they are supposed to figure out. For the conflicts and contradictions that emerge in the flow of history are ill-defined, confusing, and often subterranean, something that both politicians and public do not fully understand nor easily define. In their own way, popular communicators, those charged with creating various forms of popular art (e.g., news, TV dramas, music, and of course movies) do not understand what's happening either, but they exercise aesthetic sensibility in the creation of cultural narratives which will appeal to the immediate experience of popular audiences. This process is one of artistic recognition, in which people are helped in figuring out what's happening now by seeing the processes of the present enacted in dramas which tacitly identify the problem. Popular artists create (usually for profit) and communicate popular dramas with which people can play. The plays they create are designed to appeal to what's on people's minds (or in the backs of their minds). But in the process they sometimes achieve tacit artistic recognition of the social and political trends of the time. Popular drama provides the dramatic articulation that lets people see, or recognize, what's happening.

The relationship between art, including popular art, and social change is not simple. Art obviously occurs in the dynamic of political change, for instance,

but what its response to such change is "political" is subtle and diffuse. For art itself is a form of historical mediation, a way in which the creative minority of a culture-in-time deals with political change. Change is something that concerns elites—be they political, artistic, or journalistic—and thus evokes in them responses in the form of dramatic communications. The process is interpretive: elites interpret change in creative ways which are shared with mass publics, who in turn interpret elite interpretations in their own way. This final step is popular mediation, which finds in dramatic communication from elites cues about what's happening and how to respond to it.

Movies are artistic communication that are central to this process in American society. People make and watch movies to figure things out for themselves by seeing them acted out in dramas on the screen. Artists and audiences join in a collaborative effort to play with change, and thereby mediate it by naming and depicting it in movie narratives. Since a major aspect of change is politics, political mediation and artistic mediation may identify the same themes and dramatize the same processes. Now it may not be the case that artistic mediation consciously and with political intent portray political processes, but it may well be that artistic mediation will include cultural conflicts and temporal themes which are important in understanding the politics of a culture-in-time. In other words, one of the ways we can understand what's happening politically at a particular time is to interpret the art, the popular art, and the movies in particular which were created in response to the political changes taking place then.

If it is true that political cultures search for the completion of mythic goals, then every time is a dialectic of order and disorder. Things are orderly to the extent that we think we are attaining our goals ("the American Dream"),

and disorderly to the extent that we are not. Rudolph Arnheim has pointed to the "reassuring" aspects of the First Law of Thermodynamics (the conservation of energy) and the apocalyptic and anarchic aspects of the Second Law of Thermodynamics (entropy), and how the apparent contradiction of nature relates to art.¹² In a larger sense, every culture and every age is threatened by entropic forces, personified and represented by some Other, who serves as an obstacle to the completion of cultural goals. Cultural dramas posit those who strive for order, for the completion of the myth, and those who strive for disorder, or the incompleteness of the myth. The danger of cultural entropy is there in every era, either because of domestic faults in our Selves or because of the alien threat of an Other. The threat of "things falling apart" becomes the subject of cultural dramas, artistic recognitions that give aesthetic mediation to the questions of an age.

This process of artistic depiction is always a combination of universality and particularity, the mythic themes of an imagined past given particular dramatic form in an immediate present. When we speak of the ethos of an age, we have in mind the guiding mythology and beliefs of a people as they are manifest at a particular time. Terms such as "climate of opinion," "structure of feeling," and "spirit of an age" are not precise, nor can they be; but they do capture the idea that a particular time has its own defining character. The political attitude of an age is a very real thing to those during a period who try to make sense out of what's happening, and those afterward who try to reconstruct what happened. When we attempt to characterize an age, we try to discover what is salient, or rather what about it is conspicuous, prominent, and noticeable. The political ethos of an age involves us in a defining search for what is politically salient for the time. In American terms, that involves answering the questions: what is the political ethos of the age, what is politically salient, and how does this affect our basic enduring mythology?

The cultural dramas of an age are part of the ethos of a time, and thus can be interpreted for what they reveal about what was happening then. Popular art forms such as the movies are amenable to such analysis. Movies allow for a complex depiction of salient themes in the context of the political ethos of the time. They are a major forum for the dialectic of artistic and popular mediation of social and political trends. But, it may be asked, granted that all this is the case; how do we study movies to discern their import? Which movies? One, few, or many? What criteria of judgement do we use?

REPRESENTATION

If a picture is worth a thousand words, the saying goes, then a movie must be worth millions. Movies communicate important things about the world in which they are made, but what exactly? Historical and political interpretation of movies dates at least from Kracauer's celebrated From Caligari to Hitler. "Films," he argued, "reflect not so much explicit credos as psychological dispositions—those deep layers of collective mentality which extend more or less below the dimension of consciousness."¹³ Movies, argues Paul Monaco, "offer insight into the psychic state of the time and place in which they are created" and is a major repository of national "collective psychic energy."¹⁴ Many other writers have sensed the relationship between movies and political change, and have entertained the same idea that movies relate to the history of consciousness. The same methodological problems associated with the social history of art obtain here. As Baxandall concluded in his study of painting and experience in the Renaissance: "A society develops its distinctive skills and habits, which have a visual aspect, since the visual sense is the main organ of experience, and these visual skills and habits become part of the medium of the painter: correspondingly, a pictorial style gives access to the visual skills and habits and, through these, to the distinctive social experience. An old picture is the

record of visual activity. One has to learn to read it, just as one has to learn to read a text from a different culture, even when one knows, in a limited sense, the language: both language and pictorial representation are conventional activities."¹⁵

Movies, then, are a contemporary form of "pictorial representation," part of the popular aesthetic experience of our epoch. We may study them as part of our "distinctive social experience," part of the visual activity of our popular culture. Movies are for us what Baxandall says paintings were for the Renaissance: a "distinct kind of fact: what they offer is an insight into what it was like, intellectually and sensibly, to be a Quattrocentro person."¹⁶ The movies are for us a cultural artifact, distinctive in that they offer us insight into what it was like, intellectually and sensibly, to be an American and experience what Americans have experienced in this century. If movies obey popular "conventions," it is because they are created for popular audiences, or at least segments of that audience, can be expected to utilize the canons of popular narrative storytelling, and therefore sensitive to audience expectations.

Our approach here, then, is one that emphasizes studying the movies as artifacts of mediation. This differs from, or perhaps better complements, how this is usually done. Much study of the movie focuses on intention, or what the motives of the creators are. The intent of a directorial auteur, for instance, has been the focus of much analysis. The difficulty is that the movies are a highly collaborative art; there are very few directors who have ever been able to make such a "statement" or perpetuate a clear vision of the world; and in any case the auteur's vision may be personal, apolitical, and insensitive to political change. Further, intention is subjective in an individual, and murky in a collectivity (such as a studio). It involves us in trying to link the individual artistic mind, or the "psychology of an organization," with historical milieu.

Studying intention gives us insight into the psychology of art, but does not permit dubious political inferences drawn from subjective states.

Similarly, a great deal has been written about the content of movies, attempting to infer from their verbal and visual structure valid interpretations linked to a psychological or sociological theory. The manifest content of a movie can be studied in terms of overt structure. A genre, such as the Western or the war film, may have identifiable conventions or formulas, variations on an overt theme. The narrative form, thematic structure, or semiotic "signs" a movie manifests may be studied. Simply the technical virtuosity of a particular moviemaker or studio can become the focus of inquiry. But such foci are often complemented by trying to interpret the latent content of movies, thus underlying "signs and meanings" which allegedly lurk beneath the surface as covert messages we may not even consciously perceive.¹⁷ Such latent meanings are often thought to "be there" even though the creators of the movie didn't intend them. So psychological interpretation may revolve around the argument that Freudian symbolism or Marxist criticism is part of the latent structure of a movie.

Movies are also studied in terms of their impact. A movie's popularity may inspire inquiry as to why a particular genre or theme seems to become popular. There may be social or political reasons as to why a particular movie wins a lot of awards. A movie may become controversial because of its story, frank depictions, and so forth. When a movie becomes a phenomenon, such as "cult movies," this attracts explanation. Whatever the impact, the political implications engendered by the interest shown in a movie bear study.

Now there is merit, and problems, with the above general approaches, but they seem insufficient for the political interpretation of movies occurring in a culture-in-time that we propose here. For a political interpretation that attempts to place movies in their culturo-temporal context deals with them as historical

artifacts, something that is the province of political history. We may be drawn to movies because their author had known political intentions. Others may interest us because they seem to include manifest and latent themes with political significance. And of course movies that make a particular impact, such as becoming a box office hit, may offer clues as to the political concerns of movie-going publics.

But for our purposes here, we want to emphasize studying movies as cultural and political representations. Rather than ask what movies intend, what they contain, or what their impact is, we want to ask, what do they represent? The concept of representation gives us a fuller sense of dealing with movies as objects of political history, something to be studied primarily for what they tell us about politics. For that reason we must approach movies with an awareness of process, of movies in the temporal environs of political dynamics. Now the word "representation" is rooted in "re-present," or making present again (the "re-" prefix denotes "again, anew, retell"). Paradoxically, the general sense of the term "means the making present in some sense of something which is nevertheless not present literally or in fact...(I)n representation something not literally present is considered as present in a nonliteral sense."¹⁸ Re-presentation differs from mere presentation; to present something in a present is ahistorical and atemporal. To re-present something means to present it again in successive presents, to retell an old story again in new ways in new times. In societies of enduring continuity, cultural tales are retold in new presents in ways that represent the link between past, present, and future. They are "representative" in the sense of "making present again," by making the cultural past present in the present, thus "presenting" us again dramatic representations that mediate change. Representation makes the present understandable by showing its link to past and future, be it continuous or discontinuous. Representative dramas mediate change by locating the present in the cultural story: are we realizing what the political

culture is supposed to be in the here-and-now? Is the past being, or not being, made present again now in order to continue into the future? If not, then what discontinuity has occurred in the here-and-now that threatens to dislocate past and future?

A representation is a temporal and cultural paradox in the sense of presenting a present reality in terms of a present past and present future, and thus mediating reality. In that way, dramatic representations in the present are fictive, depictions of the mythic reality of a culture-in-time. In this sense, dramatic representations such as movies are what one writer calls real-fictions, wherein a "rhetorical communication" is about reality but not: "...it is ultimately a fiction since its advice is not in the final analysis, susceptible of empirical verification..."; if it is successful, the "fiction becomes one of those by which men live."¹⁹ A representative movie is a real-fiction, relating as it does to the present "reality" we believe we are experiencing; in that way, it is about what's happening. Yet it also is about our fictive re-presentation of what's happening, the mythologization of our times in representative dramas which give artistic depiction to our present reality. The dramatic fiction in some sense has to relate to the collective definition of the historical situation of significant segments of mass audiences and publics, because if it did not they would not recognize it as such. What is not literally present—the past and the future—is symbolically made present in dramatic real-fictions. Movies are passing events in the process, mediated representations that can be interpreted as symbolic actions.²⁰

The idea of popular art as symbolic action helps us explain the process by which movies become popular representations of politics. The political relevance of art, in this view, is that it serves not merely as propaganda or social

criticism, but also as dramatic expressions of cultural and political contradictions experienced at a particular time. A movie becomes a popular representation if it adequately portrays these contradictions for audiences. But what criteria of adequacy does one use to select movies to study? How do we decide which movies are representative? Representative of what? First, we have to decide what the major political themes of a culture are. This requires the political interpretation of a culture, a determination of what enduring themes are central to the unfolding of the political culture-in-time, and how they are dramatized in both politics and popular culture. Further, this sort of inquiry requires identifying how politico-cultural themes manifest their particular form in different historical periods. Representative movies translate into story form the contemporary quest for completion of the cultural story, and identify the struggle between cultural Self and alien Others as it exhibits itself at that time.

Another criterion is the requirement that a movie possess mythic relevance. For a movie to be representative, it must tell a story that re-presents the myths of a political culture in ways that make them relevant to the tensions of the present. As a mediated representation of political process, the symbolic action of such movies must relate the unfolding of the immediate drama to larger mythic themes in such ways that perceptive audiences can sense the relevance. In American terms, the status of the quest for moral and material community is at the core of mythic relevance. To this end, representative movies should also possess politico-cultural identification, in the sense that audiences can recognize the story and characters as identifiably American; that they can identify the cultural setting as characteristically American; and that they can identify the politics of the movie as indigenous. This is not to say that a movie must have a domestic or contemporary setting: a movie set in the middle ages in Europe may be a cautionary tale about the contemporary dangers of fascism.²¹

Another criterion of adequacy we may use to select representative movies is dramatic power. This is not to say that for movies to be politically representative, they have to be "good movies." But it seems fair to require that they have sufficient dramatic power in the presentation of story and political themes that audiences find them worth watching. Bad movies or box office busts might qualify, but it cannot be denied that good movies and movies that enjoyed box office success are more interesting, and more likely to be representative of the political climate of opinion that prevails at a given time. There is in most cases a logical connection between the dramatic power of a movie and its ability to represent the political themes of a period. A reasonable amount of popularity as registered by attendance is an indicator too that a particular movie has hit some sort of mass nerve, and certainly the sustained popularity of certain types of movies that characterize a specific era are a major clue to the state of mind of that time. But popularity alone cannot serve as a bellwether; many politically important movies were not great box office successes. Perhaps a better criterion is the extent to which a movie is memorable. Representative movies are of interest to us because they help us remember what it was like to live in a particular time. They thus become part of the memorabilia of a political culture, worth remembering and studying for their ability to remind us of the political texture of a time past. In that sense, bad movies and box office failures may in the long run tell us more about what was happening at a particular time than good movies and monetary successes.

So even though such criteria may provide worthwhile guidelines, there will undoubtedly be disagreements over which movies are truly representative. The extant literature exhibits the recurrent problems that bedevil the community of scholars that have studied the movies. The problem of intersubjectivity, for

example, is central to immediate criticism, and to the more cosmic scholarly view we take here. People not only disagree on aesthetic grounds, they also disagree on what is enduring, significant, and of course representative. Similarly, those people interested in historical placement and political interpretation of movies will continue to disagree on the significance and impact of movies in culture and time, how to interpret them, and again which movies are representative. Finally, there will be disagreements on "the social function of art," the relationship between art and life in both an aesthetic and political sense. It may be too soon, or too difficult, to reconstruct a "political aesthetics" which would provide a theoretical framework for such a project, but perhaps the concept of "political representation" can be useful for such a worthwhile enterprise. Such work will not be easy, but surely we can go beyond the virtual declaration of bankruptcy announced by one of the deans of movie scholarship, I.C. Jarvie.²²

CONCLUSION

We have here dealt, in a theoretical way, with the question of the movies as political communication. Such a subject invites theorizing, since the relationship between art and politics is difficult to pin down, and since such work as there is on the subject tends to avoid theoretical reconstruction. We are happily now overcoming the twin notions that studying popular art such as the movies is frivolous and trivial, and that popular art has nothing important to say about, nor has any relationship to, the political process. If nothing else, the election of Reagan should remind us of the complex interplay of popular communications and politics, and the confluence of popular images and expectations about politics drawn from the movies in particular. If in the future, the actor increasingly becomes a public agent of popular representation and political mediation, then surely the movies, and related fields of popular communication, bear close scrutiny from students of politics.

"If God could do the things we do," says the demonic movie director of The Stunt Man, "he'd be a happy man." The movies eternally fascinate audiences because they offer a power over life denied to us ordinary mortals. They showed a freedom from existential constraints that conquered time, space, reality, and death. They created a world with its own rules. They gave us psychic mobility, a larger-than-life world, and the narrative power to overcome the most insuperable obstacles. "Wouldn't it be great (or awful) if life were like that," we could conclude from the movies. The movies created a world of expression, and control, and dramatic logic that could not be paralleled by life. Wouldn't it be great in politics if the Good Guys always won, that the right political statement at the right time made the right difference, and that Happy Endings could be assured? Politicians can only envy the power of moviemakers to make art conquer life; if politicians could do the things directors do, they would be happy men (and women). The movies are ultimately rooted not merely in the persistence of vision, but more fundamentally in the persistence of belief, the will to drama on the part of mass audiences. Perhaps the basic relationship between the movies and politics is simply that: people, including politicians, wish that political life would imitate art, and live up to the dramatic expectations that have been so vividly created for us by the movies.

Footnotes

- 1 Walter R. Fisher, "Reaffirmation and Subversion of the American Dream," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 59 (April 1973), 160-167.
- 2 Arthur F. Bentley, quoted in Dan Nimmo and James Combs, "Preface," Mediated Political Realities (New York: Longman, 1983), pp. xiii-xiv.
- 3 Arthur F. Bentley, Ibid.
- 4 Kenneth Burke, Language as Symbolic Action (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1968), p. 28.
- 5 Cf. James Combs, Polpop: Politics and Popular Culture in America (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1984).
- 6 George Herbert Mead, Philosophy of the Present (Chicago: Open Court Press, 1932).
- 7 Ernest Becker, The Birth and Death of Meaning (New York: The Free Press, 1971).
- 8 William Stephenson, The Play Theory of Mass Communication (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1967), p. 46.
- 9 Clifford Geertz, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," in The Interpretation of Cultures (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 443.
- 10 Mark Daniels, The Comedy of Democracy (unpublished, forthcoming)
- 11 Robert Frost, cited in Ernest G. Bormann, "Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision: Ten Years Later," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 68 (1982), 288-305; quote at p. 300.
- 12 Rudolph Arnheim, Art and Entropy (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1971).
- 13 Siegfried Kracauer, From Caligari to Hitler (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1970), p. 6.
- 14 Paul Monaco, "Movies and National Consciousness: Germany and France in the 1920s," in K.R.M. Short (ed.), Feature Films as History (Knoxville: U. of Tennessee Press, 1981), p. 65.
- 15 Michael Baxandall, Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1972), p. 152.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Peter Wollen, Signs and Meanings in the Cinema (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1969).
- 18 Hannah Pitkin, The Concept of Representation (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1967), pp. 8-9.

- 19 Walter R. Fisher, "A Motive View of Communication," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 56 (1970), p. 132.
- 20 Kenneth Burke, op. cit.
- 21 Ina Rae Hark, "The Visual Politics of 'The Adventures of Robin Hood'," Journal of Popular Film and Television, 5:1 (1976), 3-18.
- 22 I.C. Jarvie, "Seeing through Movies," Philosophy of the Social Sciences, 8:4 (December 1978), 374-397.